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## Offerings

Diana C. Patin

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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# OFFERINGS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

in

School of Art

by  
Diana C Patin  
B.F.A., University of Oregon, 2016  
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to pay homage to the image-makers that have brought me here.

Sally Mann,

for never letting go of melodrama.

Catherine Opie,

for normalizing queerness.

Elle Perez,

for documenting their life viscerally.

Rana Young,

for reminding me that often the most fruitful work is right in our own home.

Ron Jude,

for showing me that something doesn't always have to be beautiful to deserve being documented.

Susan Worsham,

for imbuing the most mundane things with an allegorical sacredness.

Jenny Seville,

for being confrontational with her softness.

Jen Davis,

for documenting her fatness simply as it was.

## PREFACE

The following is an in-depth examination, in words, of the themes I considered the most while making the photographs present in my thesis work, *offerings*. My brain understands things best if they are in individual niches, so when considering how to explain the myriad of sources, approaches, and lines of thought in this work, it felt the most accurate to split them into distinct categories. I call these separate pieces of writing “essayettes,” after Ross Gay’s *Book of Delights*.<sup>1</sup>

There are four major themes represented in the photographs for my thesis. When I see myself, these are the traits I see first, and largest. I am multifaceted, as are we all, and some days I claim these identifiers with more pride than others, but when I am most succinct in my definition of myself, they represent me best. I am a woman of size, which is to say I am fat, even though on some days it feels like any pride in that is buried under a mountain of societal shame. I am queer, a member of a larger community of folks who are vibrant, especially in the face of hate and misunderstanding. I am a Southerner, both mentally and by birth, and even with the complex history that comes with that title, I will always claim it. I am someone who cares, often for others before myself, although I am learning the importance of switching that order every day.

This writing and the photographs it discusses are my *offerings*. I collected them as part of an extensive examination of self and the contentious relationship I have with self-esteem. For most of my grad school experience I have circled around discussing myself. In my final year I decided to remove all the lenses through which I examined myself and center the conversation on my journey towards self-acceptance alone. While the traits listed above are done so with pride, it has not always been that way. I have come to realize that self-love, something that is often talked about and even

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<sup>1</sup> Gay, *The Book of Delights*.

exalted, is not a peak to be reached. Through these images of both my physical self and my intimate surroundings, I reframe the narrative of self-assurance to reflect the ebbs and flows along the way. I adopt the eyes of both a lover and a critic when making this work. It has challenged me in more ways than I expected. I turned myself inside out for it. I purposefully exposed spaces within myself that were so vulnerable I previously averted my eyes from them. It required, and still does, so much tenderness. It is my hope that through these soft and sometimes confrontational images, I can communicate that while the journey towards self-acceptance is endless and at times arduous, it is one that is relatable.

The title of this work, *offerings*, feels like the most accurate way to share the work with others. These are pieces of myself, and I am offering them to you. Pieces of my body, of my mind, of my life. They are not meant to be met with any fanfare. They simply exist, as I exist. I have carved them out of time and space, and now I offer them to you. But perhaps more importantly, I offer them to myself. Fractions of seconds that I have documented in order to remember that there are always going to be both good days and bad. There will be moments of exaltation, and there will be moments of deep discomfort. The work is meant to be met with reverence, with quiet and contemplation. Much as one would offer objects to a higher power, I put these forth. For consideration. For contemplation. For growth.

And so, here are some *offerings*, in writing.

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## ABSTRACT

These photographs and writing are a set of *offerings*, collected as part of an intensive examination of myself and my contentious relationship with self-image. I first established which traits in my personality represent me best. I landed on my fatness, my queerness, my southernness, and my penchant for caring. Then I took a deep dive into each of those four themes with the objective of uncovering both the areas of exaltation and spaces of hurt within them. The images that result are both confrontational and gentle. It is my hope that the uncompromising honesty within these *offerings* communicates that while a positive self-image is desirable, a perfect one is unrealistic, and it is the journey towards it that uncovers the ripest fruit.



## FATNESS

When I talk about my contentious relationship with self-image, the first and biggest point of conflict that comes to mind is my body. It is why my body is such a large feature in the work. There are some early moments in my life that have irrevocably shaped the way I see my physical form, the vessel that carries my mind.

I think about twelve-year-old me buying my first tankini at the encouragement of my friends.

I think about my cousin asking why my shirts were always “so tight,” at the same age.

Out of necessity, I have built a conception of myself that appears quite differently than it actually exists. In truth, I am deeply self-conscious. I know what I have to do to make it through the day and I have well-honed senses of denial and compartmentalization that allow me to push everything else aside when I need to. People often read this as confidence. It is not. Despite the kind words and placations of lovers and friends, I have never felt an intrinsic positivity surrounding my physical self. As a woman, this feels all too familiar. Lindy West writes that “society’s monomaniacal fixation on female thinness isn’t a distant abstraction, ... it is a constant, pervasive taint that warps every woman’s life.”<sup>2</sup>

I think about my brother’s severe admonishment when he saw me accidentally gag myself with a toothbrush as a young girl. He made me promise never to do so again.

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<sup>2</sup> West, “The ‘perfect body’ is a lie.”

Despite my hard work over the years to accept my own shortcomings, I can't even pretend to see my body positively. It seems so easy in comparison to find solace in my mind, my abilities, and my relationships. But when it comes to my physical form, I struggle the most with acceptance. With understanding that my body is fat. My body is me and I am it. There is no Cartesian separation between the two. In the words of Roxane Gay, "I think about how fucked up it is to promote this idea that our truest selves are thin women hiding in our fat bodies like imposters, usurpers, illegitimates."<sup>3</sup> This resonates with me. I think about how I could be "better" if I looked different. I draw conclusions that people would like me more, I would be more successful interpersonally. I wish I didn't think these things, but I do.

I found it necessary to put myself in front of the camera for this work from the beginning. I began to document this chubby vessel, the fatness I have always tried to hide. Making these photographs serves as an opportunity for me to recontextualize my relationship with myself.

I think about Nathan, saying he has never considered *making* art to be a healing act.

I made a list of things about my body I hate. This was hard. I started photographing those things. That was even harder. I turned the camera on familiar things like the mushroom of fat that hangs over my jeans when I sit down, even if those same jeans "fit well" when I'm standing up (Figure 1). Although I was making these photographs, they were still hard for me to look at. I wanted to edit them in private, filling up my computer screen with the offensiveness of my body felt like the opposite of what one does in public, let alone in polite company. To quell these anxieties, I sought out other things that felt like this squeezing, this pressing against. A palm leaf pushed up against the wall of a greenhouse (Figure 2). Pressing against the fabric, much as my flesh does.

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<sup>3</sup> Gay, *Hunger*, 139.



Figure 1. *what lies underneath*, 2020



Figure 2. *a metaphor*, 2018

I told myself it was about the integrity of the image. But when we critiqued them, I sat up a little straighter, pulled my shirt away from my stomach, not wanting to betray the fact that the unbecoming fat is what is in front of me right now. As I write this the very same belly presses against the desk, straining against the waistband of my pants.

I always find conversations about big bodies beautiful, moving, and vulnerable, and I love to hear people speak candidly about their own. I read books by self-identified fat authors. These stories help me feel less alone in the understanding that working against societal shame surrounding our fatness is not a simple fix. It is hard and taxing and complicated. We understand that moving away from a negative self-image takes years of concentrated effort, and that there is no conclusive remedy. At the very least, I seek a sense of home in my own body, but often there is a disconnect. Again, Roxane Gay puts it well. “On my better days, when I feel up to the fight, I want to change how this world responds to how I look because intellectually I know my body is not the real problem. On bad days, though, I forget how to separate my personality, the heart of who I am, from my body.”<sup>4</sup> For me, age has taught me the merits of shifting my kindness and empathy away from others and unto myself. For years I made myself empty promises that one day I would hear my own affirmations and my negative perceptions of myself would change. In these fantasies, the flesh I saw in the mirror would please me. Realistically though, I needed to find a way to believe these words. A way to look at myself with a fresh set of eyes and understand that within every body, including my own, there is beauty, even in the parts we try to hide from ourselves. For this I turned to photography.

As I live with the images of my fatness, they feel more like me. Persimmons, sinking into the garden floor (Figure 3), feel fleshy just like I do.

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<sup>4</sup> Gay, *Hunger*, 149.





Figure 3. *persimmons, saccharine though they may be, 2020*

Sometimes I wonder if I'm too soft, but then I see the image of these persimmons and understand that although they are borderline rotting, they still have something lovely to offer. They are vibrant. It is the softest pieces of their flesh that make the photograph interesting, that catch my eye. I no longer feel I have to avert my eyes from the skin on display, whether it be my own or that of the fruits. The idea of having pointed conversations about these images with loved ones who may question my desire to document myself in this way still makes me uncomfortable. But, looking at the images I think, these are the kind of things I want to see.

Fatness on display. Fatness that is far from shame.

## QUEER

I don't think I understood expansiveness before accepting a facet of my identity as queer. It felt like a breath, the biggest breath of fresh air, to recognize. Restrictions I previously refused to acknowledge were lifted. Critiques from heterosexual men on my overweight body, men I was supposed to attract instead of repulse, were no longer a concern. With queerness, I began to understand myself as worthy of the identifier "beautiful," even if fleetingly.

By design the concept of "queerness" is hard to define. The Oxford English Dictionary simply states that it is "the state or condition of being strange."<sup>5</sup>

My own interpretations of a queer identity center on freedom from definition.

Queerness is a wide-open field.

Queerness is an idyllic imaginary.

Queerness is about those who *create* the reality we want to live in:

Fire Island, The Country Club, bath houses, Pride parades, communes.

Queerness is synonymous with inventiveness.

Queerness is a blank canvas, an absence of guidelines.

Queerness is a removal of expectation

Queerness is throwing out binaries.

Queerness is everything that does not fit neatly into a traditional box.

In her seminal book *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Terry Castle explores the sparse documentation of sapphic characters in literature and film. "It is perhaps not so surprising that at least until around 1900 lesbianism manifests itself in the Western literary imagination primarily as an absence, as

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<sup>5</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Queer."



chimera or amor impossibilia—a kind of love that, by definition, cannot exist. Even when “there” ... it is “not there”: inhabiting only a recessive, indeterminate, misted-over space in the collective literary psyche.”<sup>6</sup> While this lacuna has been negative in many ways, it is a gap that has also allowed queer folks, whether we be lesbians or non-lesbians, to define ourselves. We do not have to contend with centuries of history outlining the expectations of our performance both in and out of romantic relationships. We are left to determine these things on our own.

It is with this malleability in mind that I approach my photographic work. The freedom from expectation I find in the queer community shifted my view of what makes something deserving of documentation more than any other single influence I can think of. Being queer has given me the space to trust my own voice. I am bolder because I am queer. I am able to do things like document my reacquaintance with myself amidst deep chasms of self-doubt. By placing my whole self in front of the camera, with light dappling my face and chest (Figure 4), I display what it means to recontextualize negative self-talk. Pieces of my body I habitually hid have become the ones most ripe for photographing, and the safety of queerness allows me to confront my physical self in ways I consistently avoided. I make direct eye contact with the camera as an assertive gesture, stating my presence in the space while remaining vulnerable and exposed.

I think about the loneliness of learning to love yourself.

In exploring my tenuous relationship with self-confidence, queerness has been the catalyst for many acts of bravery in these photographs. Queer spaces make me feel safe enough to seek out the healing that is present in this work. They are where folks of every type of presentation are welcomed with open arms.

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<sup>6</sup> Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, 31.



Figure 4. *morning ablutions*, 2020

These spaces are where I stop trying to conform to the skinny blonde stereotype so present in my adolescence in California. The body I precariously love, be it organically or from assertions by my partner that they love everything about me, “even the parts you hate,” feels different in the light of my identity as a queer woman.

My visual explorations of queerness do not always manifest in ways that are discernible by all audiences, but they are well known to some. The coded language of queerness is everywhere, if you know where to look. Overt examples include the “hanky code,” wherein gay men in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century used different colored bandanas to indicate their sexual preference. Then there are the covert ones, such as the suggestions behind Idgie and Ruth’s “knowing glances” in Jon Avnet’s 1991 film adaptation of “Fried Green Tomatoes.”<sup>7</sup> Where straight fans called this relationship a close friendship between two women, lesbian critics saw it clearly as a romantic one.<sup>8</sup>

I think about how queerness can be applied to things other than the body.

Photographically, Catherine Opie’s series *In and Around Home* is queer because Opie herself is queer. Images that may otherwise read quotidian, such as a breakfast table, are tinged with the fact that this home, this family structure, is different. In my own home, this stands true. My space is overstuffed with sentimental items. My partner and I keep everything. Rather than leaning into the trend of minimalism, we document ourselves and our space obsessively, to remind us that our existence deserves to be held, shared, memorialized. By virtue of my own identification as a queer person, the entirety of my work takes on the same identifier. I do not make imagery that seeks to define queerness for another, I simply seek to document my own experiences.

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<sup>7</sup> *Fried Green Tomatoes*, directed by Jon Avnet

<sup>8</sup> Vickers, “Excuse Me, Did We See the Same Movie?”

In my work queerness is a thread that permeates every image, because it permeates every plane of my life. Especially in the banal, which I have always had an affinity for. In the words of John Cage, “if something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all.”<sup>9</sup> Examining these “boring” things is a great privilege. It is with the help of those who came before me, like Opie, that I am able to photograph an act as mundane as trimming my hair on the back porch (Figure 5). My partner holding the scissors, coupled with the impulsivity of the act and my direct agency in this process mean I invent myself. The rolls of my fat belly on display under the sun rather than hiding under multiple layers of cloth in the bright lights of a hair studio is an act of courage only possible because of the embrace of being queer.

To fill the hollow in attempting to define queerness, these two traits are often what come to mind: direct agency, and boldness. Aside from being difficult to define, queerness is difficult to predict. We are all constantly pushing boundaries, re-inventing ourselves and the ways we are defined. A queer world is one where the earth is constantly shifting under our feet. The polyvalences of this identity mean that each individual wrapped up in it has a different definition of what queerness means. For my part, these are mine.

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<sup>9</sup> Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*.



Figure 5. *a haircut on the porch, 2021*



## A SOUTHERNER

Being proud of my Southernness has never been a simple assertion. I've always romanticized my relationship with the Deep South. Growing up away from the region of my birth allowed me to associate the place with things like vacation and time spent with family, while my friends' assumptions relied more on the raucousness of Mardi Gras and an abundance of Confederate flags.

The South I inhabit may be defined as "a postsouthern intellectual landscape" which "appears to rest on no "real" or reliable foundation."<sup>10</sup> The region is often simply defined by our role in the Civil War, one of many infamous stories I actively work to move away from in my life. Yet being part of this postsouthern landscape means I get to decide what pieces of history I carry, and which ones I can leave in the past.

I am not new to the South. My family is from Louisiana. Not just my immediate family, but generationally. My paternal grandparents were born and raised in Breaux Bridge and spoke Cajun French all their lives; my maternal grandmother part of a long history of De La Houssayes in New Orleans. My understanding of myself has always been rooted in our ancestry here. My parents met at LSU, and my brothers and I were all born in the state of Louisiana. Although our upbringings took place in other areas of the country, we made pilgrimages back here almost annually.

I think about the contrast between the orange of the desert and the green of the bayou.

I think about how Popeyes tastes better in the state of Louisiana.

I think about looking forward to oyster po'boys, always dressed.

I think about my cousins' accents.

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<sup>10</sup> Watson, "Mapping out a Postsouthern Cinema" 219.

For me, one of the defining characteristics of a southern ideology is the presence of the past. There is something in the nature of this place that encourages me to look back in order to look forward. This appears in my own work in the form of a wisteria vine (Figure 6). The neighborhood I live in now is the same one that holds the former home of some of my parents' oldest friends. This wisteria was located in the yard of that very house, and when I went to make the photograph, I spoke with the man who lives there now, telling him that my family has ties to his home. As I photographed, I thought about Chet and Susan, how many stories I've heard about them throughout my life, and how my parents had likely been in the very same driveway when they were around my age. I was transported to the past in the same fraction of a second I took this photograph in the present.

I feel this presence of history in larger ways often, too. There is a chef named Sean Brock who has made it his life's work to bring Southern heritage ingredients to the fore, cultivating and nurturing knowledge that is, in some cases, centuries old. Again the presence of the past is paramount. Brock invests in things like the continuation of unique local varieties of produce, that may otherwise be lost. This makes me think about the land itself. Our home on the Mississippi Delta that lies between the arid hill country of Texas and the thick kudzu of Mississippi. Centuries ago, the silty ground here was deposited by the Mississippi river itself, depositing pieces of its riverbed in a wide arc. First it settled into marshes, then it thickened into the solid land on which the delta parishes of South Louisiana now sit.<sup>11</sup> We are living on part of that river. Maybe that explains why the humidity of this place is unparalleled.

I think about my aunt always saying the air down here is drinkable.

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<sup>11</sup> Monique Verdin, "Southward into the Vanishing Lands" 19.



Figure 6. *confluent time, 1975 and 2020 at once, 2021*



Sally Mann captures this iconic weather in her *Southern Landscape* series, her glass plate negatives almost dripping from the thick, humid air she captures. The “Deep South” section of her series is permeated by fog and rolling mists that cascade over crumbling ruins and prehistoric looking trees. You can feel the environs of these images merely by looking. Their visceral nature is echoed in a photograph of mine, my hands scratching at the mosquito bites that pepper my legs in the late summer heat of my backyard (Figure 7). The only thing that breaks the heaviness of these bug-filled afternoons is the predictability of what my dad calls a “3pm in the summer” thunderstorm.

I think about my mom’s obsession with watching fronts roll in.

I think about how every time it pours, I compulsively go outside to watch it.

I think about how my dad does the same thing, as did his mom. “A Patin thing.”

Against all odds, I feel welcomed by the South. Things I did not know were so specific to Southern California, like the insistence that all women have bodies as close to Barbie as possible, including the absence of hair, are different here. I see fat bodies being revered, appreciated, treated as normal instead of confronted with advice on how to lose weight or be healthier. Where the desire to be skinny was extreme in California, here the focus is on the enjoyment of earthly pleasures. It is a profoundly more pleasant way to live.

In my time living in the South as an adult, I am often struck by the ways this place differs from archetypal imaginings of it. Growing up on the west coast told me that this presence of the past in a southern identity meant the region was backwards. Yet when I first met my cohort here at LSU, I was surprised by how many of them identify as queer. At the time I was just coming into my queerness, recognizing that being in a new place may allow me to lean more heavily into that piece of myself, but honestly not expecting to be able to do so in this place.



Figure 7. *this sticky August evening, mosquitos and all*, 2020

My experience in Baton Rouge was almost in direct contrast to my time in Oregon, a place I expected to be completely comfortable. Within months of my relocation to the Deep South I had met and fallen in love with my current partner, who identifies not only as queer but as trans and nonbinary. I am not saying it is easy to be so overtly queer in a place that has historically oppressed folks outside of a traditional presentation. We still downplay our romantic relationship in rural areas, never sure if it will be a point of contention with the locals. But recently I learned that “roughly one out of every three LGBT adults in the United States—including nearly two out of every five transgender people—live in the South, more than any other region in the country.”<sup>12</sup> These are facts I did not expect to be confronted with in this misunderstood place, but they are also ones that cannot be ignored. They inspire hope. They remind me of all the change that has already occurred.

I think about Gay Easter in New Orleans.

I think about the Sankofa<sup>13</sup> symbols enslaved iron workers embedded in the French Quarter.

I think about Viet-Cajun crawfish.

I think about my partner getting gender-affirming surgery covered by Medicaid in Louisiana.

I think about Baton Rouge demographically, 48% Black.<sup>14</sup>

The South is one of the last cultural strongholds in the United States, where everything from your accent to the way you eat is indicative of your heritage. As I have spent time here outside of family vacations, I have come to learn both how close and how far off my understanding of the region was as a child. I did not understand the nuances of many aspects of life here. The resilience of a community that is decimated by hurricanes every year but bounces back jovially. The specificity

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<sup>12</sup> “Movement Advancement Project and Campaign for Southern Equality.”

<sup>13</sup> “Adinkra Symbols in New Orleans Ironwork.”

<sup>14</sup> US Census Bureau “East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana.”

of a summer depression, linked directly to how often you leave the preciousness of an air-conditioned space. The way things grow here, so fervently you are reminded that wild places are not always meant to be accessible by humans. The knowledge that no one else quite knows what it's like to be Southern until you've lived here. These are the reasons I am proud of the piece of me that has always resided here, underneath the Spanish moss and in the wet ground. Work that is about me has to include this piece, because I first understood myself as someone that had roots here. I include a photo of my face in dappled sun (Figure 8). My eyes are closed. I appear at peace, nestled beneath a live oak tree. Live oaks are iconic in the South, often living hundreds and hundreds of years, stretching their limbs out so far they touch the ground around them. If this photograph is an allegory for anything, let it draw me closer to those oaks. Steadfast. Romantic. Welcoming. Southern.





Figure 8. *the healing power of sun*, 2020

## CARE

I identify strongly with the adjective “soft.” Soft mentally, physically, and emotionally. I am also someone who intrinsically “cares.” In almost every waking moment of my life, I am considering someone other than myself. Together, these traits make me nervous. Caring can be challenging, because it provides an excuse for me to neglect the issues I have within myself. My softness sometimes feels like a weakness. I worry that it makes me easy to manipulate. As I approach the end of my twenties, I re-evaluate what to carry with me into the decades ahead. I ask myself, do I really want these identifiers, or do I simply feel tied to them because this is how I was raised?

I think about how much of this struggle is mental, internal.

When I am at my healthiest, caring for others and myself gives me not only joy but fulfillment. In Rana Young’s *The Rug’s Topography*, she uses photography to document not only a transition in her personal life with her partner, but the ways in which such care is executed. The scenes have a freshness to them, incorporating themes like washing, rest, and the passage of light and air outside. Young’s documentation of this transitory season is full of intimacy and fastidious care. Her photographs parallel my own experiences with caring for another and caring for myself. Especially in the wake of the darkness and chaos of the last year, as well as my own ups and downs with depression and anxiety, they resonate strongly. There are some photographs within my *offerings* that feel similar to Young’s in that they act as a mental balm. My documentation of the ways I enact self-care serve as reminders for myself of the work I do that makes it possible to progress along the path towards self-acceptance. They are talismans of times I have prioritized myself and the positive ramifications of that effort. By concentrating on these gifts of care, I am able to free my softness from the vigilance of protection and exalt it instead. Making these images has allowed me to locate

the spaces I go to that serve as a refuge, sometimes in my own mind, sometimes from my own mind, and often in my surroundings.

One of the most routine ways I create this comfort is through cooking and food. When I am cooking, the world falls away and I am consumed with enough menial tasks to quiet my overactive mind. There is comfort in preparing these meals, but also in eating them. My partner always jokes that I take forever to finish my food, but that is because I savor each bite. There is a tranquility I feel when eating, as if the world around me slows. Before stepping away to grab a drink, I photograph my plate resting on the arm of our couch (Figure 9). The familiarity of my home, the light flowing through the window, and the time I spent on the meal all connote warmth. For me, food is medicine. I find great solace in knowing that I am not only preparing acts of kindness for my body, but also for my mind. I study the properties of specific foods, what vitamins they carry and how they are used by healers across centuries. Food allows me not only to quell hunger, but to quiet anxiety, to invite restful sleep, and to remedy ailments.

I think about Shaina determining that food is my religion.

I think about herbal medicine.

I think about being a kitchen witch.

I am beginning to recognize the intensity of my love for sharing food as a translation of my own acts of self-care into something divisible. Because of the calm I experience in the kitchen; it is fulfilling rather than draining to give my creations away. Sharing food with others allows me to hand those I love a regular testament of my affection.



Figure 9. *a few minutes to recharge*, 2021



I make big batches of everything, and hope that my loved ones will enjoy eating what I've made. I hope that they will feel, in some regard, the joy I feel in making things and sharing them. As if the that feeling is palpable when the food is consumed. Samin Nosrat puts it well: "My ultimate goal is to make people feel comfortable and taken care of, so they can just enjoy the moment. And maybe eventually, pass that kindness on to others. Cooking for them, with them, just happens to be the easiest way I can do that."<sup>15</sup>

I think about making Radha's recipes as a way to feel close to her.

I think about Uncle Bruce, how his elaborate dinners were always infused with love.

I think about A'lee, always making everything from scratch.

In contrast, occasionally in order to find solace and safety, it is essential that I escape the confines of my own mind entirely. When I am at my most anxious, I turn to the written word. I am at rest between the pages of a good book. When I am reading, there is little else outside of the story, and my hands holding the book itself. My love for reading began so early that I cannot remember a time before I voraciously consumed stories. Throughout my life, books have saved me again and again. When we moved across the country when I was 10 years old, my best friends for an entire summer were the Harry Potter novels. When my friends in high school were consumed with significant others and sports, I set my sights on reading all the "classics." When I needed a way to keep my brain from fixating on negative thoughts at the beginning of the pandemic, I read a book about an octopus. Books have lifted me up, gouged me out, made me cry, and given me hope.

On other occasions, in order to fully contend with the needs of my mind and accept the virtue of my softness in a positive light, I need to shed the negative thoughts that roll around in my

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<sup>15</sup> *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat*, directed by Caroline Suh.

head. The most effective way I do this is through writing. I fill journal after journal with rants, moments of seeking, moments of intense need, and various other emotions that feel too close to home to discuss with others. Writing is often cathartic, but at times it can be chaotic. This chaos is evident in a journal page, turned transparent by the sun (Figure 10). The object is immediately recognizable—a piece of writing—but the contents are largely obscured.

I speak often in this writing about the bruised places within myself that will likely always remain tender to the touch. Even when I shower myself with these gifts of care, some days it still is not enough. But focusing on them, turning them into moments I can look back on and hold in my hand as a tangible memory of time I cared for myself first, has been one of the most important things I have done in my young life. Even if time is the only ointment to soothe the rawest parts of my self-image, at least I know I have dedicated some of it to myself here.

SPURGE, WONDERFUL WOMAN! I'VE BEEN IN THE (IN MY  
MISPEAKINGLY DATED). I'M SITUATION IN THE (IN MY  
COFF CUTTER, AND I'VE BEEN REMINDING MYSELF  
AND MYSELF I'D AVENT TIME! EVERYTHING IS LUSH  
AND MY HEAD IS A MESS! NOT BECAUSE I  
QUOTE TWICE ACTUALLY) BUT SEVERAL SEASONS OF  
IT, I'VE FEELT SWALLOWED AND KNOW WHAT I  
IN A MISTAKE IN THE OR A MISTAKE IN THE  
IN JUNE, I'M IN THE PAPER FOR MY OWN  
IN A MISTAKE IN THE OR A MISTAKE IN THE  
MISTAKE IN THE OR A MISTAKE IN THE  
I'VE BEEN IN THE PAPER FOR MY OWN  
I'VE BEEN IN THE PAPER FOR MY OWN  
I'VE BEEN IN THE PAPER FOR MY OWN  
I'VE BEEN IN THE PAPER FOR MY OWN

Figure 10. *this stream of consciousness*, 2021

## AFTERWORD

The complexity of my relationship with my self-image is by no means unique. I am not trying to say I have reached some sort of great conclusion or have any words of wisdom to offer about “how to love yourself” because truthfully, I do not. Not wholeheartedly. Not unconditionally. But I am proud of myself for making it here, and for making this work. And that sense of pride is largely dependent on these *offerings*, both the photographs and the writing.

The impetus for me to create is often the need for an act of healing, a way to process things, a way to give them visual credence and allow my brain to focus on them for an extended period of time. Shifting my creative energy to a space of self-reflection has allowed me to ruminate on my scars. I have come to recognize these scars as places ripe for exploration. Rather than attempting to patch or cover up the chasms within myself with something more appealing, I have learned that the most vulnerable places need to be explored. Giving myself the space to do so has allowed me to see myself in a new light. It has made me grateful for these blistered places, as they have made me strong and interesting and multifaceted.

My fat body, which takes up space in so many of these photographs, feels like a burden when I squeeze it into clothes every morning, but a gift when I use it to warm my bed at night. My queerness, something I feared would be a point of contention in the South, has found me freedom and love and community here instead. Identifying as a Southern woman, something my friends on the west coast assume has to do with pageantry and ignorance, provides me with a connection to heritage of my family and the space to redefine an important cultural space in our country. The fervor with which I care for others, which my brother and I constantly warn my mother not to overdo, has become the greatest gift when turned on myself.

As with many things in this life, the journey I document in this work does not have a final destination. There will never be a day where I have no qualms about myself. I truly believe some

things are fractured as a place for growth. Therefore, that fracture has to remain. I have tried to be as honest as possible in making these photographs and writing this reflection, documenting the things I deeply desire, but have not yet quite found. All I could do was meet myself where I was at. Where I am. To offer myself the time and space to explore these nuances, and a hope that they will encourage you to consider yourself as well.



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## VITA

Diana C Patin is a photographer, a bibliophile, and an eternal student. As an image-maker she is most interested in work that exalts the banal and focuses on the daily life of herself and her surroundings, in order to normalize things that may not be commonly seen in the photographic canon. She hopes to continue researching what queerness and southern-ness mean to her in the years to come. She received her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Oregon in Digital Art with a Minor in French, and then went on to receive a B.F.A. in Photography there as well. She is a 2021 M.F.A. candidate in Studio Art at Louisiana State University.